

# SCHOOL CHOICE SURVEY IN THE STATE



## **Public Opinion in Kentucky:**

Many agree with the concept of school choice. Some disagree. But everyone needs more information. As the public debate continues to grow louder about how best to provide a quality education to all Kentucky children, it is critical to know the facts and to have a good understanding of public opinion.

This statistically representative sample of 1,200 likely Kentucky voters illustrates public opinion on a range of K-12 education issues including school choice.

## **Kentucky's Opinion on K-12 Education and School Choice**

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## Executive Summary

This statistically representative survey of 1,200 likely Kentucky voters illustrates public opinion on a wide range of K-12 education issues. The underlying theme of the Friedman Foundation's Survey in the State series is to measure voter attitudes toward public institutions and policies, innovative ideas, and the state's K-12 education system.

Kentuckians have shared with us their views about "school choice," which includes school vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, charter schools, homeschooling and virtual schools. Kentucky is the twelfth state to be surveyed in our series since November 2007.

There is a disconnect between parental schooling preferences (expressed in this survey) and actual school enrollments. Fifty percent of K-12 parents said they would like to send their child to a private school. In reality, however, approximately nine percent of Kentucky's K-12 students attend private schools. Twelve percent of Kentucky parents said they would like to send their child to a charter school. The state of Kentucky does not have a charter school law. Thirteen percent of Kentucky parents said they would choose a regular public school for their child. Approximately ninety-one percent of Kentucky's K-12 students attend regular public schools. Kentucky lacks a sufficient school choice system to match parents' schooling preferences.

A total of 1,200 phone interviews were conducted by Strategic Vision between March 20 and 22, 2009. The margin of error for the full sample of likely voters is  $\pm 3$  percentage points; the margin of error is higher when considering the number of respondents for a given demographic subgroup.

### Key findings include:

- **Kentucky likely voters most frequently associate the state with the terms "depressed," "Kentucky Derby," and "beautiful."** Respondents were asked what one word best describes their impression of Kentucky, and their answers produced 15 general terms (see page 12 for Wordle illustration).
- **Kentucky's Democrats (D) and Republicans (R) find common ground on school choice topics and issues.** Voters who identify themselves differently in terms of political affiliation are likely to share common views on school choice policies. High levels of support exist for **tax-credit scholarships** (D: 49 percent | R: 51 percent), **charter schools** (D: 55 percent | R: 54 percent), and **school vouchers** (D: 52 percent | R: 52 percent).
- **Less than one out of four of Kentucky likely voters (23 percent) rate the state's public school system as "good" or "excellent."** We consistently see low-to-modest figures across the states. We have asked this same question in twelve states, and Kentucky voters register the third lowest rating, just ahead of Maryland (17 percent) and Ohio (20 percent). Vermont has scored the highest at 44 percent. We have yet to observe a satisfaction rate greater than 50 percent.
- **Voters most frequently describe the state's school system as "crowded," "unequal," and "expensive."** Respondents were asked what one word best describes their impression of Kentucky's school system, and their answers produced 16 general terms (see page 14 for impression list and Wordle illustration).
- **Kentuckians are skeptical about new public school spending.** Seven out of ten voters (70 percent) say Kentucky's level of public school funding is either "about right" or "too high." The same proportion of respondents actually underestimate the actual per-pupil funding in Kentucky public schools (\$9,348).

- **Forty-one percent of Kentucky voters say “overcrowded schools” and “overcrowded classrooms” are major challenges confronting Kentucky’s public school system.** Kentuckians are also more than twice as likely to say “lack of accountability” (22 percent) is a systemic challenge when compared with “lack of funding” (9 percent).
- **Eighty-six percent of voters prefer choosing a school for their child among options that include private schools, charter schools, virtual schools, and homeschooling.** This high figure is consistent with previous state surveys asking the same question, most recently in Ohio (83 percent), Rhode Island (83 percent), Vermont (89 percent), and Oregon (87 percent).
- **Kentucky voters express a relatively high preference for private schools.** When asked “what type of school would you select in order to obtain the best education for your child,” 50 percent of respondents chose private schools. This finding is consistent with other recent state surveys: Ohio (44 percent), Rhode Island (55 percent), Vermont (44 percent), and Oregon (44 percent).
- **Nearly half of Kentuckians favor a tax-credit scholarship system.** When asked if a proposal were made in Kentucky to create a tax-credit scholarship system, 49 percent of respondents say they favor a scholarship system funded by individual and business charitable donations. The western part of the state registered the highest support for tax-credit scholarships (52 percent); the south-central region the lowest (45 percent). **Fifty-one percent** of respondents, age 45 and younger, support tax-credit scholarships.
- **Kentuckians with either personal or familial ties to labor/teacher unions (U) share similar schooling views when compared with “non-union” voters (NU).** They rate the state’s school system as “good” or “excellent” at low levels (U: 22 percent | NU: 23 percent). They prefer private schools over other school types (U: 46 percent | NU: 49 percent). Both groups have substantial proportions favoring **tax-credit scholarships** (U: 50 percent | NU: 49 percent), **charter schools** (U: 49 percent | NU: 54 percent), and **school vouchers** (U: 50 percent | NU: 52 percent).
- **When asked about school vouchers in general, 52 percent of Kentucky voters say they support the idea.** More than half of interviewed voters say they are favorable toward a school voucher approach allowing families to pay for their child’s school tuition. The western part of the state registered the highest support for vouchers (56 percent); the south-central region the lowest (45 percent). **Fifty-one percent** of Kentucky low-income households favor school vouchers. **Fifty-three percent** of households in the middle income bracket ( $\geq \$25,000$  and  $< \$75,000$ ) also support school vouchers.

<sup>1</sup> The subgroup “K-12 Parents” makes up 69% of the total survey sample (see page 15).

<sup>2</sup> Regular public school enrollment (2007-2008) obtained from the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE). Phone exchange with Lisa Gross. Private school enrollment estimate obtained from Stephen Broughman, Nancy Swaim, and Patrick Keaton, *Characteristics of Private Schools in the United States: Results From the 2007-08 Private School Universe Survey* (NCES 2009-313). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), Table 15.

## Demographic Perspectives

**CENTRAL (n=199)**

23% rate the state's public school system as "good" or "excellent"

52% prefer private schools

11% prefer regular public schools

12% prefer charter schools

24% prefer homeschooling

21% are familiar with virtual schools

28% favor virtual schools

51% favor tax credits for individuals and businesses funding private school scholarships

54% are familiar with school vouchers

52% favor school vouchers

17. How familiar are you with "virtual schools" in K-12 education? These schools are sometimes called "cyber schools" and "online schools."

